# Assisting the educational process subjects in a difficult life situation as a condition for the prevention of school violence

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**Abstract** The article describes the necessity of psychological assistance to educational process subjects (teachers, parents) in a difficult life situation. The research conducted by the authors shows that both teachers and students have a difficult life situation experience connected with various life spheres and do not have clear stress controlling strategy that is manifested in the growth of anxiety, fear, frustration, desire to react aggressively to others. In this regard, rather promising direction of violence and cruelty prevention in the modern educational space is the work of a psychologist with subjects (teachers, children) in difficult life situations to form skills of their own emotional states control, decision-making and difficult life situations overcoming, their borders defending and their personal space protection.

## Introduction.

Growth of violence in the modern educational process – cruelty in the children's relationships, aggressive attitude to teachers and staff, fighting, humiliations, mockeries, nicknames assigning, endless comments and biased views of the teacher, derisions, humiliation in front of other children, conflicts with parents – is increasingly becoming a reason for a destruction not only of children but also of teachers, parents leading to irreparable consequences: breakdowns, use of physical force against children, children's beating each other, "order" of parents, teachers, suicide attempts, capture and execution of hostages**.**

Practice shows that, as a rule, a difficult life situation of the subject who has committed an act of violence is behind everything described above. While organizing psychological work, it is this circumstance that requires taking into account. A difficult life situation as a mismatch between what people want (to do, to reach, etc.) and what they can do finding themselves in these circumstances and positioning their own capabilities, leads to negative experiences, frustrations, psychological discomfort, disappointments. Without any experience of constructive response, without being ready for new, unknown and unexpected for themselves situations, many children and adults resort to one of the most primitive and ancient ways of solving problems – violence which victims can become anyone ("abuser", more weak, unprotected, happened to be passing nearby, etc).

According to recent studies, 50% of the subjects of the educational process (teachers, children) are abused with varying frequency and intensity. Until recently, the problem of school violence was treated primarily with respect to the students both as subjects and as objects of violence. Modern practice shows that more "adult" subjects of the educational process (teachers, administrators) do not always "cope" with life situations and resort to violence or become its victims.

## Main body.

School violence is a kind of violence in which there is a use of force between children and/or teachers, towards students or by students towards the teacher. The most common forms of violence in modern schools are considered to be such phenomena as individual and group aggression, bulling, mobbing, cruel treatment to classmates, acts of blackmailing, threats of physical violence and others. Behavioral responses of the victim of violence lie in a wide range from reciprocal cruelty to suicide attempts. Feelings of abandonment and resentment, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness make children and teachers go to extremes.

Interest to the behavioral problem in difficult life situations permeates all human existence and finds its comprehension and reflection in the culture (especially proverbs, sayings). For example, "put the sorrow on the joy" (reassessment), "stop to grieve for what you can't help" (acceptance of the situation as inevitable), "patience gives skills" (use of personal potential), "one may as well go (and) hang" (destructive way of behavior); "we can fight this disaster" (active life position).

As the subject of psychological research, a behavioral problem in difficult life situations has formed relatively recently. In domestic science the

problem of difficult life situations is presented in the works of Dementiy L.I., Kryukova T.L., M.V. Saporovskaya and others). As resources, domestic researchers consider cognitive abilities (V.A. Bodrov), personality traits, social groups to which personality belongs and relationships within them (T.V. Gushchina, Ye.V. Kuftyak, Ye.A. Petrova, and others).

F.Ye.Vasilyuk is currently recognized as the most famous domestic explorer of difficult life situations problems. In his opinion, in the most general terms critical situation should be defined as a situation of impossibility, i.e. a situation in which the subject is confronted with the impossibility of implementing the internal necessities of his or her life (motives, aspirations, values etc). F.Ye. Vasilyuk in his work comes from the general idea according to which the type of critical situation is determined by the state of "impossibility" in which the subject's activity has been. The "impossibility" is determined, in its turn, by the fact of which vital necessity is paralyzed as a result of the inability of existing subject's types of activities to cope with present external and internal conditions of life [1].

In the late XX century in foreign psychology, the direction dealing with "coping" problem arises (the English term "coping" means 'to cope, to overcome, to fight'; the German term "Bewältigung" – difficulties overcoming).

The term "coping" was firstly used by L. Murphy in 1962. According to L. Murphy, "coping" is some attempt to create a new situation whether it is threatening, dangerous, putting in an awkward position or joyful and favorable [2].

Nowadays Western scientists (H. Hartman; R.S. Lazarus, S. Folkman; N. Haan; M. Perrez, M. Reicherts; S. Endler, D.A. Parker) defined the basic notions and determinants of coping behavior. In the works of E.A. Skinner, M.J. Zimmer-Gembeck, it is studied the dynamics of coping behavior; key periods (jumps) are highlighted: between the 18th and 24th months when children learn to regulate their own behavior – coping is carried out by parents; between the 5th and 7th years – coping is associated primarily with changes in the processes of memory, perception, social relationships, emotions and self-understanding; and at the age of 10–12 years – physiological changes and changes in the ways of self-reflection, relations with the outside world and others [3].

In more recent studies two age periods are analyzed: 14–16 years – the role of autonomy and identity, and 20–22 years – there are changes associated with significant changes in social relationships, with significant life events. According to J.J. Arnett, J. Brandstädter, changes in the course of emotional processes and decision-making, the growing role of meta-cognitive and emotional regulation are particularly interesting [4,5].

Somewhat later, in the early 90s of the XX century, coping behavior becomes the subject of research in the Russian psychology. K.A. Abulkhanova-Slavskaya notes in her research that within the life strategy the ways of value contradictions resolving fulfill an important function – coping with uncertain conflict, stressful situations of the most general nature containing contradictions between the demands of the social environment and the human personality and having a significant impact on the course of people's life [6].

According to A.V. Libin, a harmonious development of human personality largely depends on the fact how the person reacts to adverse life circumstances [7].

Currently, according to the statement of S.K. Nartova-Bochaver, the hallmark of the modern understanding of coping behavior is the transfer of the coping problem consideration on a wide range of situations, on not only extreme but simply subjectively meaningful ones. Thus, S.K. Nartova-Bochaver says that "over time the concept of coping "became separated" from the perspective of extreme conditions and was successfully used to describe the behavior of people" [8].

Nowadays in the Russian psychology research areas and schools have already established: the Kostroma school of psychologists headed by T.L. Kryukova is focused on the study of coping behavior in different periods of life of the individual in family and educational spheres (N.O. Belorukova, M.S. Golubeva, Ye.V. Kuftyak, O.B. Podobina, M.V. Saporovskaya); the study of coping strategies in the field of clinical and health psychology (N.A. Sirota, V.A. Tashlykov, Ye.I. Chekhlatyy, V.A. Yaltonskiy); the analysis of coping behavior of individual professional and age population groups (Ye.S. Balabanova, R.M. Granovskaya, S.V. Gridneva, Ye.Ye. Danilova, K.I Kornev, G.S. Korytova, Ye.B. Lunina, I.V. Mikhaylycheva, I.M. Nikol'skaya, L.Ye. Petrova, I.P. Strel'tsova); a large number of studies is devoted to personal determinants of coping behavior (L.I. Dementiy, M.S. Zamyshlyayeva, T.L. Kryukova, D.A. Leont'yev, A.YU. Malenova, K. Muzdybayev, S.V. Gridneva, A .I. Tashchèva, M.A. Kholodnaya).

Analysis of the classical approaches to the definition of the essence of coping reveals two major trends: firstly, it is spoken the coping to be an individual way of interaction with the situation according to its own logic, significance in human life and people's psychological capabilities [9];

Secondly, it is spoken the coping to be a social behavior or a complex of adaptive deliberate

actions (cognitive, affective, behavioral) that help people to cope with the internal stress and discomfort by ways appropriate to personal characteristics and situations through deliberate strategies of actions [10].

At present, it is noted the researchers' desire to consider coping behavior as a multi-level process combining the requirements of the situation, culture, experiencing the personality peculiarities and using processes of internal and external regulation of the subject [8].

Within this subjective approach by T.L. Kryukova, coping behavior factors were offered: dispositional (personal), dynamic (situational), sociocultural (environmental) and regulatory [11].

Modern science has made numerous attempts to classify the behavior strategies in difficult life situations. The typology offered by S. Folkman or its modifications is quite popular. The scholar allocates physical, material, psychological *and* social coping resources; divides the resources on personal and environmental [12].

Analysis of diversity and variability of domestic and foreign researchers' approaches suggests that the choice of strategy is largely determined by the specifics of the situation and the individual characteristics of a person, his or her cognitive response peculiarities. Almost all approaches of the researchers to the classification of response strategies in difficult life situations can be differentiated into constructive and non-constructive (destructive) with a varying degree of conditionality. At the same time, almost all scholars consider "conversion" to the aggressive, violent forms and ways of responding as the most striking indicator of destructiveness. Being unable to cope with the situation, without knowing the ways of a constructive response to difficult situations, the person (both a child and an adult) resorts to one of the most ancient and primitive ways of problems solving – the violence.

Problems of violence in general is a vast area developed in the world psychology, pedagogy, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, medicine and other branches of science. Theory of violence is investigated in the works of F. Nietzsche, S. Freud (psychoanalysis), representatives of the contemporary French postmodernism (G. Bataille, G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, P. Klossowski, M. Blanchot, R. Barthes, M. Foucault), and others.

Violence in schools and even in kindergartens has been known for a long time. Since 1905, the first works on this problem have begun to appear in the press.

The first systematic study of the problem of bullying (school bullying) belongs to the Scandinavian scientists – D. Olweus, P.Heinemann A. Pikas, E. Roland. Then the interest has arisen in the UK (W. Orton, D. Lane, D. Tattum, E. Munthe). In the USA, a special attention to the bullying began to be paid in the early 90s.

School bullying is seen as a serious socio-pedagogical problem in the modern world. In the West, the problem of bullying is the number one problem. In many European countries, the United States it is associated with the public interest. In the EU, more than once meetings at the level of Ministers of Education were held and legislative measures for its prevention were elaborated (Ananyadu and Smith 2002). Anti-bullying actions are held at both local and national and even international levels. It is not a question of a full overcoming of bullying – it is clearly impossible but only of the prevention of its most dangerous consequences. The most effective anti-bullying program initiated by D. Olweus in Bergen has been successfully used in Norway where it was given the national priority program status in 2001. This program is based on four basic principles involving the creation of a school (ideally home) environment characterized by: warm, positive interest and involvement of adults; austere frameworks and restrictions for unacceptable behavior; sequential application of a non-punitive, non-physical sanctions for unacceptable behavior and violation of the rules, the presence of adults who act as authorities and role models.

Western researchers presented statistical data, described the options of bullying manifestations, psychological characteristics of victims and instigators, assistance, developed numerous anti-bullying campaigns. However, despite all this, the problem of violence and cruelty in educational institutions remains relevant. January, 27 is marked in the calendar as the International Day against bullying (school bullying).

Now, in the domestic science there have been developed four approaches to the problem of violence. The first group consists of social and philosophical, psychological and educational researches. In the current social and philosophical studies of Zh.V. Bukhareva, A.A. Guseynov, V.V. Denisov, P.Ye. Matveyeva and others, violence is seen as a socio-cultural phenomenon of destruction of universally recognized human community grounds (traditions, moral and legal norms).

The second group of research is devoted to studying the influence of the social environment on child development and to the organization of preventive work in this environment (L.S. Alekseyeva, S.A. Belicheva, M.I. Buyanov, A.S. Makarenko, S.T. Shatsky and others).

The third group of research is devoted to the study and development of training and socio-educational technologies used in correctional work with children (V.P. Bespal'ko, V.G. Bocharova, N.A. Kataeva, N.I. Kravtsov, N.V. Kuz'mina, V.T. Lisovskiy, V.D. Semyonov, N.F. Talyzina and others).

The fourth group consists of recent studies which analyze individual causes of violence in the educational process in relation to each other associated with difficulties in learning activities and school maladjustment, various educational factors of violating the socialization process (V.M. Dimov, I. A. Nevskiy, V.G. Popov, L.M. Prozumentov and others). It is in the context of this group of theories that work with the educational process actors in difficult life situations seems to us promising.

**Methods.**

We conducted a pilot study of students and teachers who are in difficult life situations which allowed identifying the main categories of difficulties and psychological characteristics of subjects experiencing them.

The study of teachers in difficult life situations took place in several stages. The first stage is to identify the type of a difficult life situation which teachers get in. For this purpose, a questionnaire was designed, according to which, teachers had to choose those life situations (school ones, private ones) which deliver the greatest troubles and which are emotionally tough to experience. As the most common ones, there were called: conflicts with parents and administration – 43%, strained relations with colleagues – 31%, personal troubles (divorce with one's husband/wife, conflicts with one's own children and parents) – 26%. This survey showed that the most common difficult life situations occur in the professional field of teachers. The questionnaire developed by us also assumed the identification of frequency of difficult life situations experiencing by teachers. 11% of respondents got into a difficult life situation at least once, 78% experienced it more than 3 times and 11% of teachers – more than 5 times in their entire professional career.

Next, we were interested to find out how teachers react to difficult life situations and which coping strategies are used to resolve them. For this purpose, there were carried out methods for determination of individual coping strategies (MDICS) by R. Lazarus and S. Folkman [12].

The most preferred strategies to overcome stressful situations were strategy involving efforts to change the situation, including an analytical approach to solving the problem – 28%; confrontational coping

(aggressive efforts to change the situation, a certain degree of hostility and risk appetite) – 26%; escape-avoidance (desire and efforts to escape from the problem) – 14%; self-control (efforts to regulate their emotions and actions) – 12%; search for a social support (call for help of others) – 11%; distancing (cognitive efforts to secede from the situation and reduce its importance) – 9%. As seen from the results of the study, 49% of the surveyed respondents have destructive coping which does not only lead to the solution of a difficult life situation but also makes it worse.

In the next stage, we investigated the psychological characteristics of teachers who found themselves in a difficult life situation. The presence of anxiety, frustration and depression, increased aggression were chosen as the basic criteria. For this purpose, such diagnostic methods have been implemented as "Differential diagnosis of depressive states" by V.A. Zhmurov, "Diagnosis of the mental states self-esteem" by H. Eysenck, "The diagnostic methods of aggressiveness" by A. Assinger. Analysis of the results revealed that 63% of teachers who participated in the study are in a state of anxiety accompanied by obscure, incomprehensible to the person sense of growing danger, foreboding, tense expectation of tragic outcome of the situation; 18% of teachers have a psychological state similar to depression, 10% are in a state of frustration and only 9% of the surveyed respondents feel relatively stable, without any acute emotional distress in a difficult life situation. Study of teachers' aggressiveness showed that 46% of respondents are correct enough in relationships with colleagues; 38% have increased aggressiveness, imbalance and cruelty to other people.

A similar study was conducted among middle school students of the 7-9 forms (teenagers of 13–15 years old). There were interviewed and tested on 30 people of each age group (total 90 people). Pilot study assumed identifying the types of difficult life situations. Analysis of the responses showed that teenagers often named problems of interaction with peers and parents. Such responses are consistent with their leading activity – an intimate personal communication which has the greatest influence on the personality development in this period. 56% of teenagers show that difficult life situations arise in the family and they are related to the parents' attitude to their studies, friends and free time redistribution. Teenagers indicate the longing to become free, emancipated from the pressure of parents. This leads to frequent conflicts between them and, as a consequence, to the suffering of the teenager. 27% of teenagers see difficulties in the educational process – this specifies the informational overload ("have to

learn a lot", "a large amount of lessons and homework"). The difficulties attendant educational process also includes anxiety and fear about the sense of responsibility for the untrained task. Conflicts with friends and peers are also referred as main ones – 48%. Other difficult life situations occur rarely, for example, adolescents indicate lack of success in sports or other areas of interest which often cross with the scope of communicating with friends and parents.

Regarding the question, "How often do teenagers experience a difficult life situation?" – 78% answered that difficult life situations arise constantly. Thus, they do not emerge from state of stress effects, occur only the reducing of their intensity. 22% of respondents keep a quite carefree existence and their difficulties arise 1–2 times a week, or they may not occur at all during one or two months. We can safely affirm that children are immersed in the complex causing psychological trauma situations constantly accompanying them. Teenagers also indicated that the relations between close relatives had a profound effect on their life – 67% indicated that their parents' quarrels, the death of a close relative seriously reduced their desire to learn, reduced mood and activity, increased the desire to act impulsively and aggressively.

We are also interested in the coping strategies most commonly used by teenagers. For this study, we applied the "Methods of determining individual coping strategies of E. Heim" [13].

Analysis of the responses shows that the majority of teenagers use such cognitive coping strategies as "confusion" – an unproductive strategy (36%). The strategy of "self-preservation" also gains a large percentage (24%). In the 9th form, out of 30 respondents, this strategy is used by 37% – this is probably due to the development of enhanced strong-willed qualities and other types of self-regulation. Productive strategy of "problem analysis" is practically unused – it is used only by 4% of all respondents.

According to the distribution of answers within the block of emotional coping strategies, "protest" (18%), "emotional release" (37%), and "aggressiveness" (28%) prevail – these three types of coping strategies constitute 73%. Productive coping strategy – "optimism" – is hardly used – by 3% of the respondents while the rest are divided into the "suppression of emotions" – 10% and "passive cooperation" – 14%.

Among the behavioral coping strategies adolescents often use "distraction" – 15%, "conversion" – 31% and "compensation" – 19%. They represent relatively productive strategies. Rather large percentage uses a non-constructive

strategy of "active avoidance" – 23% and "retreat" – 8%. Only 5% use "cooperation" which is recognized as a productive coping strategy.

**Results.**

Thus, the pilot study has showed that the vast majority of teachers have an experience of difficult life situations which are often connected with their professional sphere, the respondents do not have a clear strategy of overcoming of the stress and the situation in general, and their emotional state can be regarded as critical – increasing anxiety, fear, frustration, desire to react aggressively to others. A similar study was conducted among middle school students of the 7–9 forms (teenagers of 13–15 years old). 30 people of each age group were interviewed and tested – total 90 people.

As for adolescents, we can conclude that teenagers of the 7–9 forms subjectively perceive their life as a succession of difficult life situations which intensity may increase and fade but the difficulties are always present. We can state that coping strategies used by teenagers are unproductive in the majority of cases while constructive strategies are used by a minimum number of surveyed students.

**Conclusion.**

Analysis of the results of the conducted study suggests that rather promising direction in the prevention of violence and cruelty in the modern educational space is the work of a psychologist with subjects (teachers, children) who are in difficult life situations. At the moment we are working on filling of essential systematic psychological support stages of the educational process subjects in difficult life situations. Argumentation, development and testing of cycles of activities for children of elementary, middle and senior school, teachers, parents which were compiled taking into account age (for pupils, their parents), career (for teachers) and the specifics of behavior in difficult life situations. Construction of the educational psychologist's work with children in the form of module system involving cycles of activities with children, cycles of joint training of children together with their teachers, parents. Recommendations are developing for parents, teachers and administrators of educational institutions. In the work, we consider important to improve the psychological and pedagogical competence of adults (parents, teachers); to improve communicative culture, conflictological competence of pupils; to decrease hostility and aggression, to reduce emotional reactions that accompany aggressive behavior; to optimize interpersonal relationships, psychological climate in an individual class and educational institution in general; to prevent deviations in the emotional sphere of the educational process, to form skills of coping with one's own

emotional states, in particular, with an adequate and safe expression of anger; to develop the stress-resistant personality traits of all subjects of the educational process; to form strategies and skills of decision-making and difficult life situations overcoming, skills of their borders defending and protection of their personal space.

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